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Plans on ice: Freezers & logistics are the reasons Pfizer's vaccine is all hype, and won't be a magic bullet

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Pfizer's new vaccine sent the stock market soaring this week © Reuters

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By **Peter Andrews**, Irish science journalist and writer based in London. He has a background in the life sciences, and graduated from the University of Glasgow with a degree in genetics.

The announcement on Monday that the Pfizer/BioNTech Covid vaccine was 90% effective injected rocket fuel into the stock market and hope into hearts everywhere. But the vaccine's cold-storage requirements present huge problems.

Immediately after the announcement, politicians **began** falling over themselves to hand fat checks over to the Big Pharma giants, hoping that the news would inspire hope in their public. Many parts of the media treated it likewise as a crushing blow to the coronavirus; the Economist **called** it “the beginning of the end.” But not everyone shares their optimism. Concerns are emerging about how practical the Pfizer vaccine could be, requiring as it does hugely expensive supporting equipment.

Straight from the fridge

The Pfizer vaccine uses messenger RNA (mRNA) to combat the virus, an advanced genetic therapy that uses the virus' own genetic material against it. Because mRNA is in a sense a living molecule, the vaccines have to be constantly kept at extremely low temperatures: -70 degrees Celsius or -94 Fahrenheit to be exact. And that is the maximum: ideally they would be even cooler.

This takes freezers. Big, expensive ones, and lots of them at that. The vaccine can only be **stored** in a normal refrigerator, like one you would have in your kitchen, for five days prior to use. After that they spoil, but the boffins are currently working to extend that period to two weeks. Opening the freezer as little as possible also helps.

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While initial reactions were white hot, many health policy makers seem to be going cold on the idea of Pfizer's vaccine. This [report](#) outlines how the East Asian nations, especially the poorer ones like Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, are not keen on the idea of splashing out for God knows how many giant freezers which would have to survive journeys to remote communities in difficult terrain or on distant islands. Not to mention the weather, which in warmer climes will make the energy demands even greater.

But it is not just the poor countries that are worried. South Korea and Japan [claim](#) to not currently have the cold storage space for a Pfizer-type vaccine. If this is how Asian countries are reacting – countries that were widely praised for their technological approach to handling the outbreak – how could this work in Latin America and Africa?

In fact, even the most sophisticated American hospitals in big cities have nothing like the capacity to store Pfizer vaccines. And [according](#) to one publication, nothing less than “a gigantic new network of freezers” will do.

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Dry ice

Pfizer themselves [claim](#) to have “developed packaging and storage innovations to be fit for purpose for the range of locations where we believe vaccinations will take place.” Apparently it involves using dry ice to transport the vaccine by land and air. That is all very well in theory, but again, it is difficult to look past the scale of military-style operation this sort of thing would entail.

But with problems this complicated, the true scale of the challenge will not become apparent until it has begun. Governments, at least in Western Europe, have a tendency to [spend](#) money first and ask questions later when it comes to fancy equipment. The Irish government, for example, last year [spent](#) over €2 million on a single printer for their parliamentary buildings. If that is anything to go by, perhaps they will splurge on the freezers.

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Big Pharma wars

Politicians are absolutely right to be expressing these concerns about the logistical nightmare the Pfizer vaccine appears to present. Any vaccination programme is a massive undertaking, but Covid vaccines in particular have a host of additional challenges baked in. The [accelerated](#) timeline they are being developed at, the [confusion](#) over who is to be served first and the [apparent](#) lack of enthusiasm from the public for even getting them at all.

One former Big Pharma honcho was particularly [scathing](#) about the way in which Pfizer announced their early results. He called it “a cynical and egregious marketing ploy by Pfizer to get early orders” and said that Pfizer “know that mass vaccination with a vaccine that needs storage at -80 degrees is completely unworkable.” It should be noted that this is a former director of rival firm GSK, and so there may be some company pride at stake. But he is certainly not alone, as many experts are doubtful that a large roll out of this vaccine is at all feasible.

All of this said, it looks like Pfizer's boss has done [just fine](#) from the announcement.

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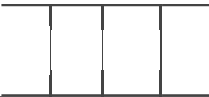
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